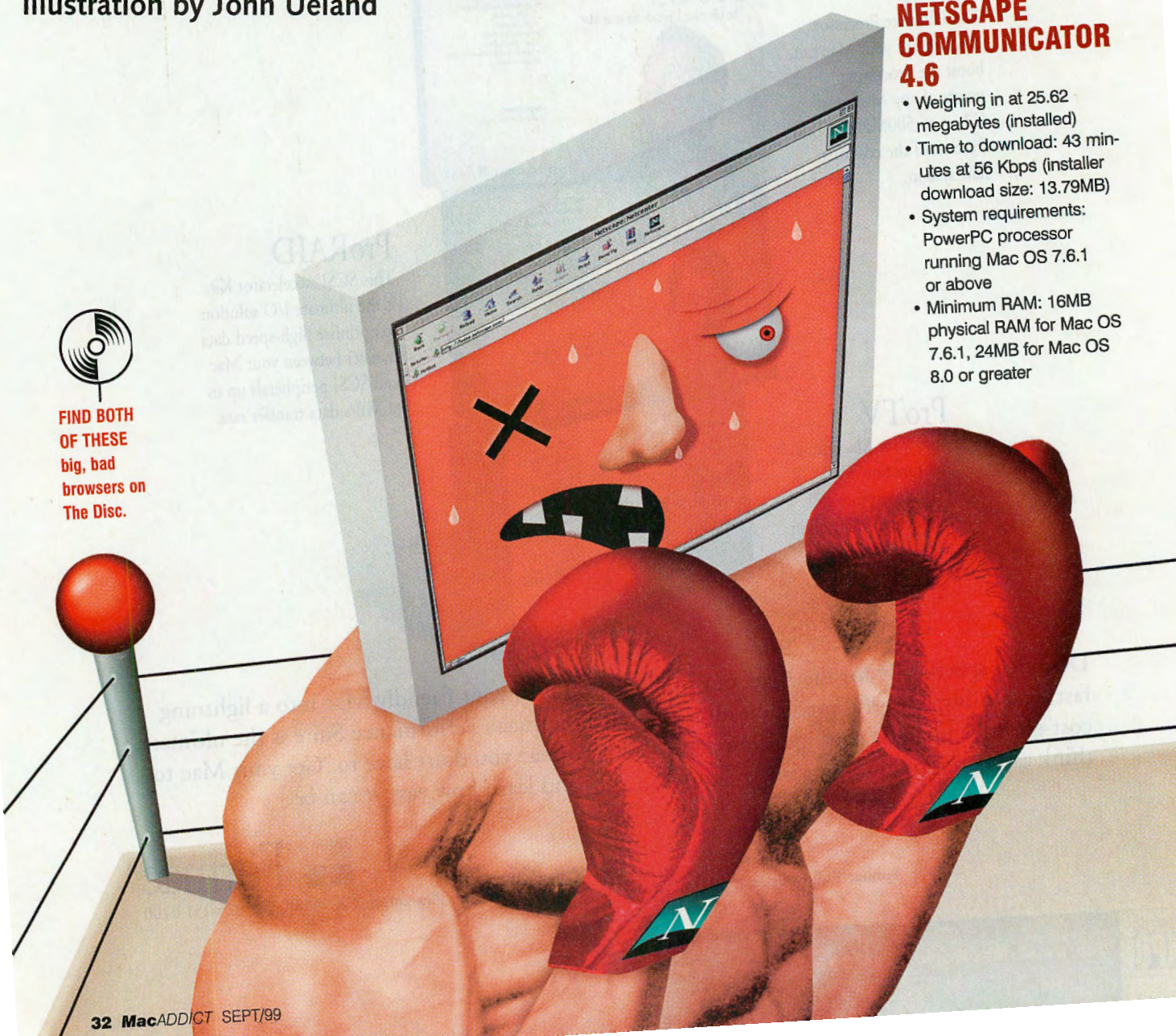
BROWSER BRAWL

by Kevin Savetz
Illustration by John Ueland

FIND BOTH OF THESE big, bad browsers on The Disc.

NETSCAPE COMMUNICATOR 4.6

- Weighing in at 25.62 megabytes (installed)
- Time to download: 43 minutes at 56 Kbps (installer download size: 13.79MB)
- System requirements: PowerPC processor running Mac OS 7.6.1 or above
- Minimum RAM: 16MB physical RAM for Mac OS 7.6.1, 24MB for Mac OS 8.0 or greater



"Ladieeeeees and gentlemen, tonight, in an exhibition fight for your entertainment, you will witness a rare match between two undisputed heavyweights—and the biggest browsing competitors—Netscape Communicator and Microsoft Internet Explorer. This brawl is about strength, speed and style, and will take place in four rounds: portals, email, and speed, followed by a bonus round on special features."

MICROSOFT INTERNET EXPLORER 4.5 with OUTLOOK EXPRESS 4.5

- Weighing in at 12.02 megabytes (installed)
- Time to download: 27 minutes at 56 Kbps (installer download size: 8.49MB)
- System requirements: PowerPC processor running Mac OS 7.5.3 or above (7.5.5 or higher recommended)
- Minimum RAM: 8MB (with Virtual Memory on) or 12MB physical RAM

ROUND 1 the portals

NETSCAPE COMMUNICATOR: MY NETSCAPE

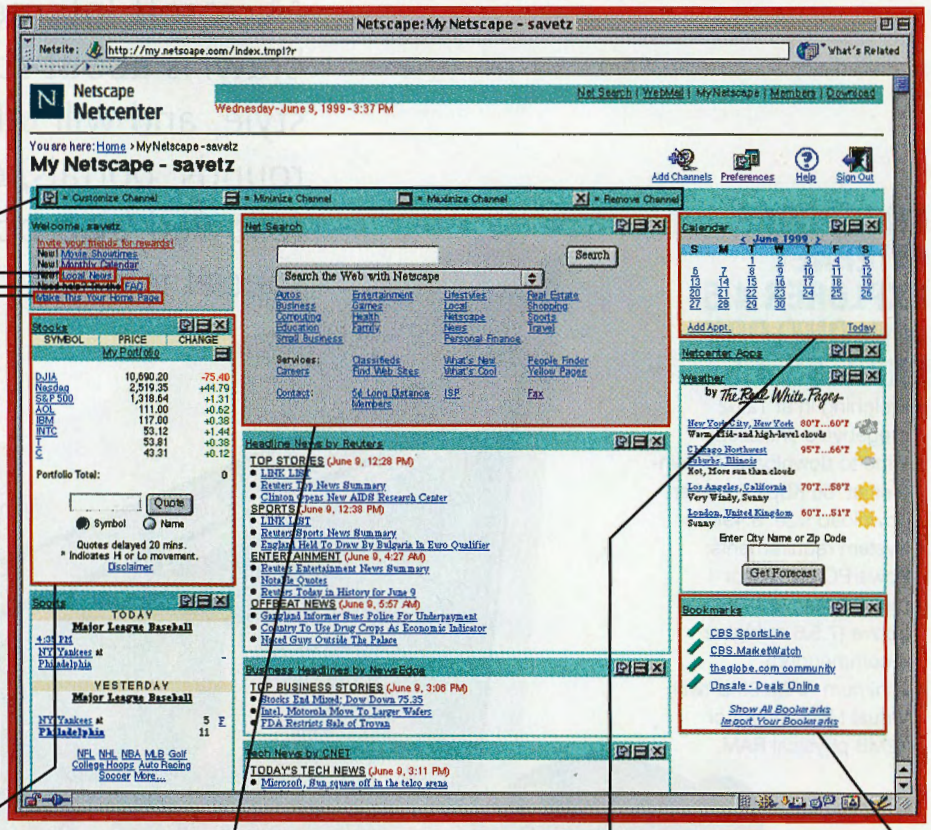
My Netscape page provides "channels" such as headline news, stock quotes, sports scores and a weather summary. You can collapse or expand channels individually. Cool, except for the Windows-like icons.

Tell it your ZIP code and My Netscape will serve up local news—sort of. I'm treated to news from San Francisco, which is about 350 miles from my home. If you live in a big city, however, you can get truly local news.

We were going to complain about the page's bland mint-and-white color scheme, but Netscape read our minds and added a "customize your colors" option. You can pick custom colors or choose from a variety of prefab color schemes.

Extensive personalization options allow you to add or remove information from the home page: you might remove the horoscopes and sports scores in favor of a local event listing and calculator. Then tell it what types of headlines you want to see and which stocks you want to track.

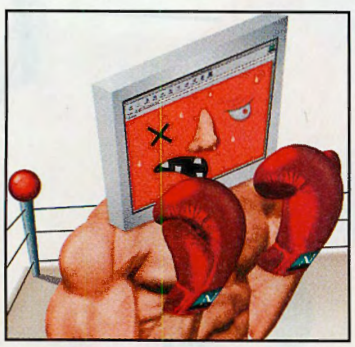
Market watchers will enjoy the My Portfolio channel. Tell it what stocks you own and how many shares, then My Netscape will show your daily profit or loss. Nosy shoulder-surfers will be astounded by your net worth. A few clicks away, Netscape provides real-time stock quotes.



The search window provides centralized access to many of the major search engines. Some favorites, however, like Hotbot, AltaVista and Yahoo, are conspicuously missing.

The calendar function allows you to track appointments, birthdays, and reminders. You can also have it automatically list events that match your interests, such as sports, movies, concerts, and trade shows. A click switches the small full-month window to a full-screen, by-the-hour appointment scheduler.

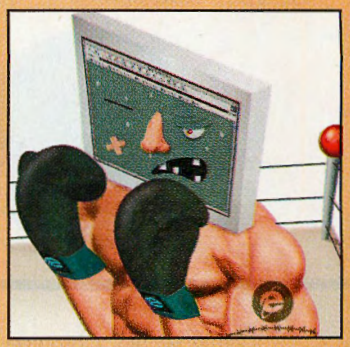
The "bookmarks" channel allows you to import up to 100 bookmarks from your Web browser to the My Netscape page. You can then access those bookmarks from any computer on the Web—a plausibly useful function for road warriors.



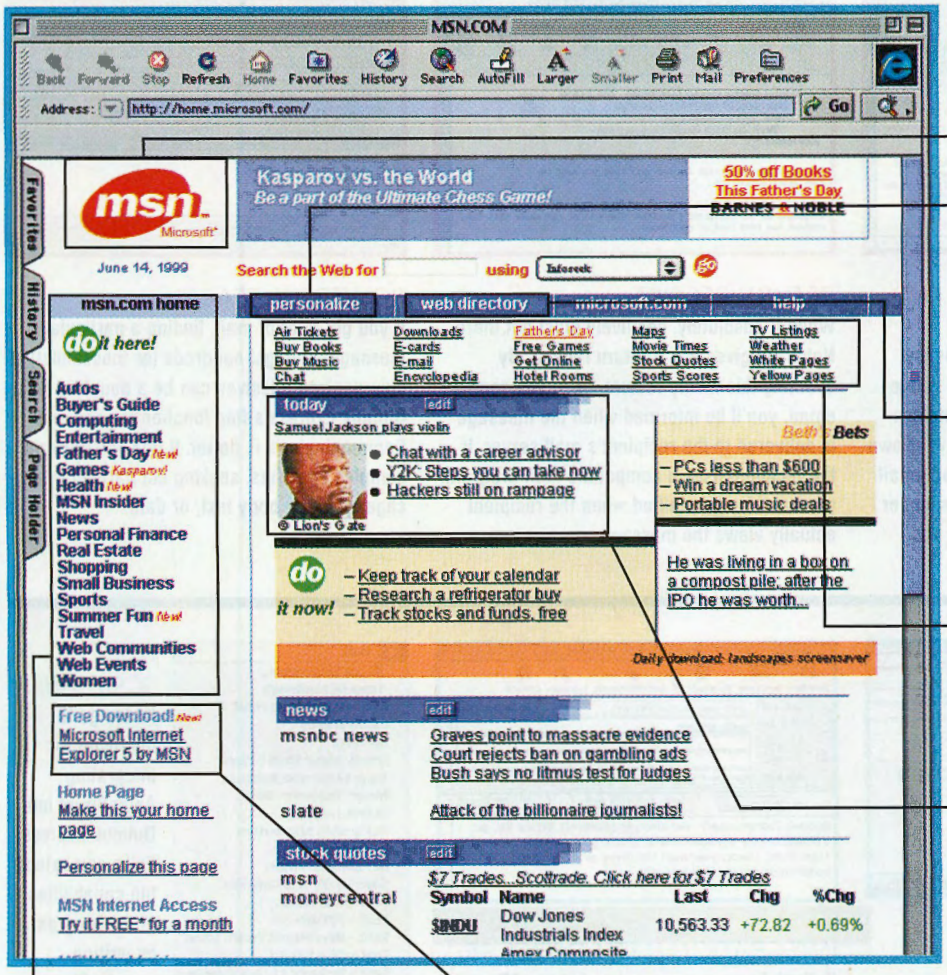
COMMUNICATOR

Your home page is where you hang your hat—and many of us choose to call one of the myriad "portals" home because they're convenient, centralized starting points. Among your choices are Snap!, Go, GoTo and other sites with short, catchy names. Of course, the browser makers would prefer you stuck with their portal.

Netscape's portal is called My Netscape—the URL is (rather predictably) http://my.netscape.com. Microsoft's portal, whose charming six-syllable name, "MSN.com Home", doesn't exactly roll off the tongue, is at http://home.microsoft.com.



INTERNET EXPLORER: MSN.COM HOME



Last year, MSN.com was launched under the moniker "Start.com". Now, Microsoft's portal shares the name of its all-but-forgotten, Windows-only online service.

Personalize the page 'til you drop: you can choose from an impressive mix of news, weather, and sports sources, as well as stocks, travel sites, media clips, and other goodies. There's only minimal control over the page layout, though.

The Web Directory provides daily site picks, access to search tools (again, some of the best are absent. Why is HotBot, http://www.hotbot.com, always the odd man out?), and a browsable directory.

Like My Netscape, you can add your favorite Web links to your MSN.com home page. This works especially well if you like only four Web sites, because that's all it will let you add.

The site does offer a lot of great content, from CNET and Wired, Forbes and Fortune, TV Guide and MTV. Too bad there's no way to organize it.

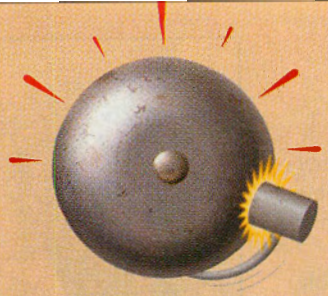
(Not Pictured)

Microsoft also provides a site just for Mac users: Microsoft Mactopia, at http://www.microsoft.com/mac/. It features Mac-related news headlines from Apple, CNET, TidBITS, and other sources—some fresh, some stale. See this month's Editor's Note.

MSN.com Home offers a lot of pertinent information—you can check your free Web-based email account, see the local weather report, and find Web sites—but it doesn't organize it all as well as My Netscape can.

Watch out—along with the good stuff, the portal is laden with ads for Microsoft products, news about Microsoft products, and articles about Microsoft software. Yes, it's what you would expect, but enough is enough.

THE WINNER: Netscape. Although both sites offer access to copious amounts of information, My Netscape's interface is superior—and offers extras (like the calendar) lacking at MSN.

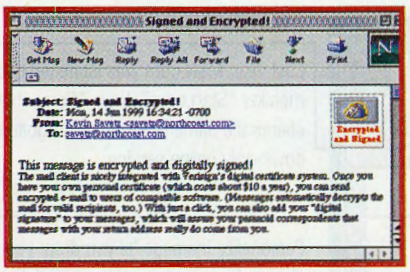


ROUND 2
mail

What would a browser be without email? Communicator's built-in client is called Messenger; Microsoft's email tool is called Outlook Express and is a separate program from Explorer. We looked at three key features of each.

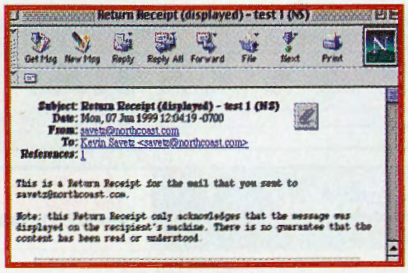
Both programs do a marvelous job of showing and sending HTML email, replete with graphics, hyperlinks and fonts. Remember, though, that text-only email is not dead. There are still many email programs that can't show email encoded with HTML, so be careful not to send HTML email unless you know the recipient uses a compatible mail client.

COMMUNICATOR


Signed and Encrypted!
Subject: Signed and Encrypted!
Encrypted and Signed
This message is encrypted and digitally signed!

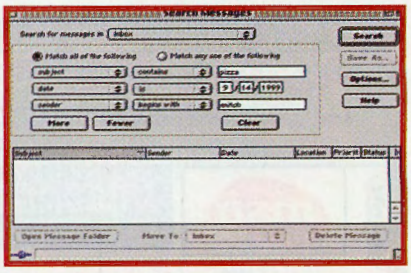
MESSENGER ENCRYPTION AND DIGITAL SIGNATURES

It's easy to keep love letters and business notes secret using Messenger, which is integrated with Verisign's digital certificate system. Shell out a mere $10 a year for your own certificate and you can send encrypted email to users of compatible software. (Messenger decrypts the mail for valid recipients, too.)


Return Receipt (displayed) - test 1 (NS)
Subject: Return Receipt (displayed) - test 1 (NS)
This is a Return Receipt for the mail that you sent to savetz@northcoast.com.
Note: this Return Receipt only acknowledges that the message was displayed on the recipient's machine. There is no guarantee that the content has been read or understood.

RETURN RECEIPT

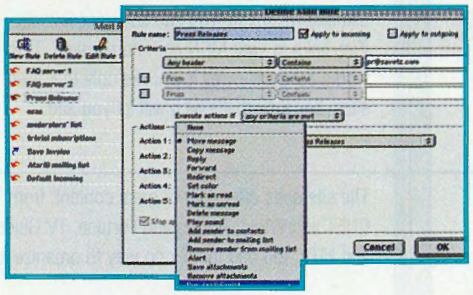
When it absolutely, positively must get there, Netscape gives you a return receipt. By enabling this handy feature when you send an email, you'll be informed when the message is delivered to the recipient's mail server. If the recipient uses a compatible mail program, you can also be notified when the recipient actually views the message.



POWERFUL SEARCH

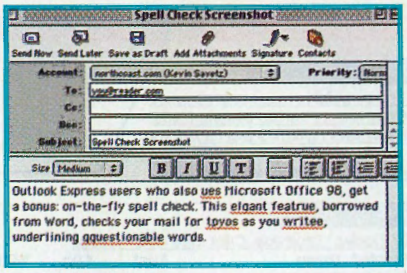
If you get a lot of mail, finding a particular message amongst hundreds (or thousands!) of disorganized missives can be a daunting task. Outlook Express's find function is good, but Communicator's is better. It lets you perform complex searches, seeking out particular message headers, body text, or date.

INTERNET EXPLORER



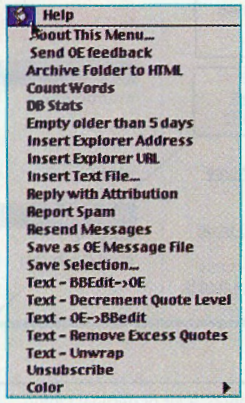
OUTLOOK EXPRESS KILLER FILTERS

Netscape's Messenger has mail filters, too, but OE's pulls out all the stops. The program automatically forwards or replies to messages meeting certain criteria. It can process file attachments or add the message's sender to your contact list. Like Messenger, Outlook Express is also a newsgroup reader—unlike Messenger, you can apply rules to newsgroup posts.


Spell Check Screenshot
Outlook Express users who also uses Microsoft Office 98, get a bonus: on-the-fly spell check. This elgant featrue, borrowed from Word, checks your mail for typos as you writee, underlining qquestionable words.

INTEGRATION WITH OFFICE 98

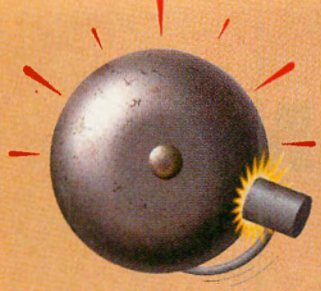
Outlook Express users, who also use Microsoft Office 98, get a bonus: on-the-fly spell check. This elegant feature, borrowed from Word, checks your mail for typos as you write by underlining questionable words. You can also access your Outlook Express contacts list from other Microsoft applications, and even do email merges.



IT'S SCRIPTABLE

Kudos go to Microsoft for integrating AppleScript into Outlook Express. Folks can extend the capabilities of the program by writing scripts. These handy add-ons can be used to archive your email, report spam, quickly unsubscribe you from a tiresome mailing list, and more. A bevy of ready-to-use scripts are available at the Unofficial Outlook Express Web page: http://www.macemail.com/oe/pages/applescript.shtml.

THE WINNER: Outlook Express. Besides the features listed above, OE supports multiple email accounts, multiple signatures (handy if you need several ways to end your messages), and the IMAP mail protocol (a great way to share one email account between two computers).



ROUND 3 speed

So, your browser can proofread your email, mix drinks, and clean the cat's litterbox? None of that matters if it can't show you a Web page, and quickly. So round three of our little battle is devoted to speed. The question: how fast could each browser download and display 30 Web pages?

We used both browsers to visit a variety of popular home pages, like amazon.com, snap.com, and apple.com. To be fair, we set the disk cache on both browsers to 5MB and then emptied them. No matter which browser you use, some careful choices in the Preferences window can keep things running at top speeds. Choose Preferences from either browser's Edit menu to get at it.

COMMUNICATOR

In Internet Explorer, judicious choices in the Web Content prefs panel can help speed things along at the expense of multimedia sexiness. For instance, you can choose whether pictures should be displayed "faster" or "better"—that is, whether IE should sacrifice image quality for speed. Go ahead, make the sacrifice. (You can also disable images entirely.) IE also lets you disable video, sound, and plug-ins, which will speed some sites up considerably. You can even disable Java in IE's Java preferences panel and save time by not downloading those fat applets.

In Communicator, similar preferences are in the Advanced prefs panel—again, disabling Java and images will speed up your surfing. (For our tests, we opted for the full multimedia experience in both browsers: pictures, sounds, Java—we wanted it all.)

Finally, for speed boosts in both browsers, you should keep your cache at a minimum of 4MB, although bigger is better—to a point. Don't waste drive space on more than 10MB of cache.

So, how did the browsers fare? Our testing was done on one computer, a PowerMac 7200. We surfed at different times of the day using our beloved cable modem—the ISP was Northcoast Internet, based in Eureka, California. For Netscape Communicator, the total time to download and display 30 Web pages was 7 minutes and 15 seconds. IE finished the race at a slug's pace of 11 minutes and 15 seconds. There's four minutes of life that could have been better spent. Using the browsers back to back, the speed difference is palpable—one thinks twice before clicking on a link in IE, wondering if it will be worth the wait.

THE WINNER: Netscape Communicator. Hey, it's faster.

WEB SITES TESTED:

www.abc.com
www.altavista.com
www.amazon.com
www.aol.com
www.apple.com
www.butterball.com
www.cbs.com
www.cnet.com
www.ctw.org
www.deja.com
www.ebay.com
www.eff.org
www.excite.com
www.go.com
www.hotbot.com
www.humboldt.edu
www.ibm.com
www.landsend.com
www.macaddict.com
www.marketwatch.com
www.microsoft.com
www.mtv.com
www.nbc.com
www.netscape.com
www.pbs.org
www.remarq.com
www.shockrave.com
www.snap.com
www.swatch.com
www.webmonkey.com

OTHER CONTENDERS

Internet Explorer and Netscape Communicator may be the best-known browsers, but they aren't your only choices. A variety of flyweight contenders are waiting in the wings, hoping to spar with the big boys. Try out these browsers if your Mac doesn't have enough RAM or disk space to run the Big Two, or if you simply think different.

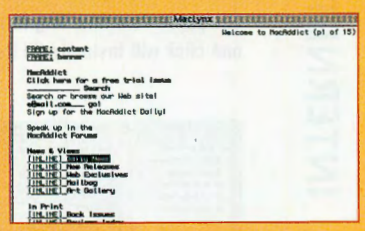
ICAB

The new kid in town is iCab, a sweet little browser from Germany. iCab doesn't have the hefty system requirements of the big boys' browsers. Versions are available for PowerPC and 68K Macs—as long as you have System 7.5 or above and 4MB of free RAM, you're good to go.

It's very fast, and surprisingly feature-laden, given its svelte size. It supports HTML 4, cookies and cookie filtering, frames and bookmarks, and a lot of other features you might not expect in such a tiny browser. The PowerPC version supports Java, but the 68K version does not. The program is still in beta—the current version doesn't yet support JavaScript or Cascading Style Sheets Level 2, although those features are planned.

During the beta test period, iCab is free. Afterwards, the full version will cost $29. A free "lite" version will also be available. Download iCab at http://www.icab.de/.

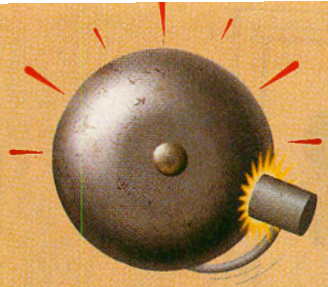
LYNX



Lynx doesn't do graphics. At all. This accounts for its small memory and disk space needs: it fits on a floppy disk and only needs one megabyte of free RAM. Lynx may not be the prettiest browser, but it will get your aging PowerBook on the Web without complaints.

Not having to load graphics from Web servers makes browsing the Web with Lynx very fast, even over a slow modem. Lynx loads quickly and displays pages quickly. It doesn't have the overhead of code to show graphics or Java applets. It doesn't play MIDI music, have a built-in HTML editor, or support plug-ins.

It does what's important, though: Lynx's features include bookmarks, frames, forms, cookies, proxies, and security for handling credit card transactions. MacLynx is free: you can download it from http://www.lirmm.fr/~gutkneco/maclynx/.



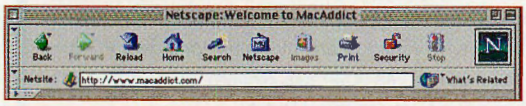
FINAL ROUND

Some of the best goodies don't fit neatly into any category—so for this round, we've highlighted the best features unique to each browser.

COMMUNICATOR

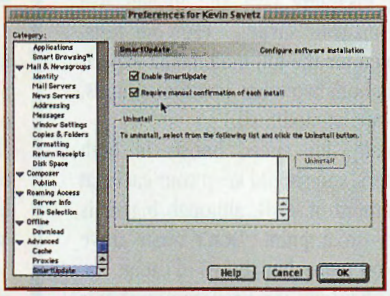
CLEAN INTERFACE

Communicator's simple interface is appealing. The buttons are in places that make sense, and don't eat up too much valuable surfing space. Compare that with Explorer's litany of buttons and tabs, along with the panels that appear and disappear. You can call us purists, but a simpler interface is a better interface, and Communicator has it.



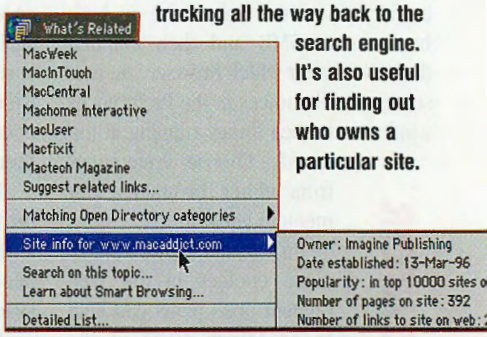
SMARTUPDATE

Netscape makes upgrades painless with SmartUpdate. When a new version of Communicator is released, SmartUpdate will notify you, then (with your permission) fetch and install the patch. You won't have to wait for eons while downloading the new version—SmartUpdate only downloads the new parts of the program. It works with plug-ins, too.



SMART BROWSING

Netscape Communicator's "What's Related" button searches out sites that are similar to the Web page you're currently looking at. You can use it as a research tool, or simply as a fun way to learn about sites that might interest you. Once you've found one site of interest, Smart Browsing can be a fast way to find related sites without trucking all the way back to the search engine. It's also useful for finding out who owns a particular site.

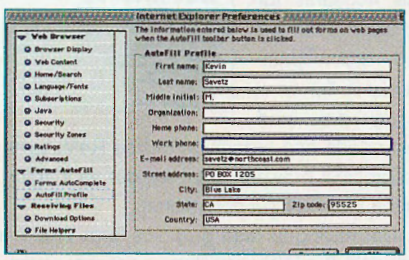


INTERNET EXPLORER

THE WINNER: It's a close call, because both browsers offer interesting features lacking in the other. The TKO goes to Explorer, though, for its time-saving installer and form-filling functions.

FORMS AUTOFILL

What a time-saver: feed IE your name, address, phone number and other personal information once. Then, the next time a Web site presents a daunting form full of questions, one click will instantly fill it out.

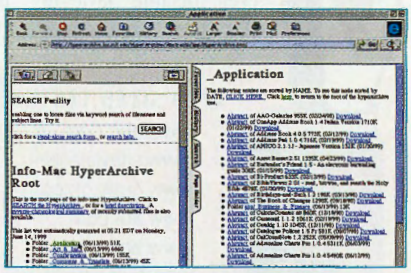


INSTALLER

Installing IE is so easy we just had to mention it. There's no fussy installer, and no need to reboot. Instead, when you download IE, you get a virtual "SMI" disk. Just drag a folder from it to your hard drive, and you're done. IE's installer is much smaller than Netscape's, in part because it's not weighted with unnecessary add-ons like AOL Instant Messenger and Internet Config.

PAGE HOLDER

You've found a great Web page with a motherload of outbound links. Now what? Try using IE's Page Holder feature, which keeps the links page on screen. Linked pages appear in another panel to the side, but the page of links never disappears. It's so handy.



Referee's Decision

The winner is Netscape Communicator; its elegant interface and relative speed give it the edge against Internet Explorer. At least, for now.

Microsoft is already beta-testing the Windows version of Internet Explorer 5. If the Mac version has parity (a big if), we can look forward to more automated features, a "related links" function, a built-in streaming audio player, and "Web accessories" to customize the interface.

Version 5 of Communicator hasn't been announced yet. But it will be the first major release since Netscape made the browser's source code available to the public (at http://www.mozilla.org). Who knows? Communicator version 5 may include a variety of fascinating additions developed by the Internet community—the users themselves.

Kevin Savetz (savetz@northcoast.com) writes about Macs and the Internet for Computer Shopper and other magazines. An avid collector of vintage computers, Kevin is as likely to be playing with an Atari 800 or Timex-Sinclair as with his Mac.